CHAPTER 3

Autonomy, Community, and the Jewish Self

3.1 Introduction

Up to now I have used the Peircean notion of a community of inquiry as an equivalent term to a religious community insofar as it is the carrier of a particular religious discourse. I have also used the Davidsonian ‘principle of charity’ as an equivalent notion to the truth and unconditional status of core religious symbols. Davidson’s ‘principle of charity,’ the assumption that conversant are referring to a common world, is the formal condition for communication, mutual understanding, and making sense. It is, therefore, the necessary ground for the development of the system of beliefs and references that constitutes knowledge. In the first two sections of the book I have explained why I believe that these notions, the community of inquiry, and the ‘principle of charity’ rendered in its rabbinic version, explain well the dynamic and methods of a religious discourse developing in a community in its movement in history. However, I have not addressed in these discussions a necessary condition of rational discourse. This is an assumption that Peirce, Davidson and all other pragmatist explaining knowledge in communal, holistic and dynamic terms require of rational discourse: the open-endedness of the discourse of reason. The discourse we call reason must not heed to any authority concerning truth outside of the inherent logic of the process of thinking and other than the inputs of our sensual experiences. Peirce makes this postulation explicit in his famous article “The Fixation of Belief,” when he claims that inquiry begins with doubt and aims at settling beliefs.1 Peirce, for whom the scientific method is a refined mode of thinking, rejects other methods of arriving at a belief, namely, the method of tenacity, the method of authority and the a priori method. These may be impressive displays of power, but they are clearly ineffective as means to arrive at truth.2 Peirce also refuses to define truth and reality in any other terms than what the scientific community holds as true. In introducing his famous and much-debated notion of a hypothetical “end of inquiry,”3 Peirce claims that the scientific process itself, and not some predetermined

2 Ibid., 116–119.
3 Peirce, “How to Make our Ideas Clear,” Ibid. 139; CP; 2.775, 1901; 3. 432, 1896; 5.430, 1905; 5.494. 1907; 8.41, 1885; 2.29, 1902.
set of facts is the object of inquiry we call ‘truth.’ No external authority other than the voice of experience and reasoning methods has a claim on truth and beliefs. Davidson makes the same point in his analysis of terms such as truth, meaning, subjectivity, objectivity and intersubjectivity. His insistence that belief and meaning are tied together is, in effect, a refusal to allow any element external to the discourse itself to interfere with questions of truth and validity.

My analogy between religious discourse and scientific reasoning assumes that religious communities conduct their conversations with similar procedures of reasoning when they search for truth and interpret their way through history. But, it is hard to attribute an equivalent notion of open ended formal process of reasoning to these communal inquiries after truth. Both religious practitioners and scholars of religion testify to the strength of pre-established beliefs in the set of ideas that dictate individual’s world picture and their choices of conduct. Note that the latter allusion to ‘belief’ assumes a different notion from Davidson’s holistic and circular notion of belief. Belief, or its synonymous notion, faith, is usually rendered as the feeling that ties the believer in a relation of affirmation to a reality outside of herself. This reality is determined prior to any individual’s deliberative endeavors both in the temporal sense and in the logical sense. We usually contrast the affirmation we call ‘belief’ to our notion of reason. Reason is a power that allows individuals to make choices based upon free, open ended operations of the intellect, and does not include an inner pre-intellectual, drive.

In Chapter 3 I tackle the question of the freedom of religious reasoning and religious life. I analyze the notion of freedom of thought and conduct by looking closely at the religious practitioner as a self who is related necessarily to an external transcendent factor and a community of discourse. This self, I claim, is a believer, regardless of the community of discourse she relates herself to. She can be a religious believer, of a religious faith, or a scientific believer, of the faith of science (or both, as I claim below). Instead of being a distinct type of feeling towards claims or objects outside oneself, I construe faith as the notion that determines the specific community of inquiry the individual self places herself in. The faith of a self conditions the type of reasoning this self, as an autonomous reasoner, practices.

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4 For an account on the debated notion of Peirce see Misak, “Truth and the End of Inquiry.”